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Aeroflot Suspected of Espionage Flights

One American response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan which is probably as irritating to the Kremlin as the Olympic Games boycott is the curtailment of U.S. flights by the Russian state airline, Aeroflot.

Since the Afghanistan aggression, Aeroflot has been restricted to two flights a week out of Dulles International Airport, the federally operated facility outside Washington. Aeroflot's flights into New York were halted, not by the U.S. government, but by the Teamsters union, which has refused to service Soviet planes there.

What bothers the Russians is not the loss of revenue, but the cutback on espionage activities furthered by Aeroflot. The Soviet planes, with their KGB security personnel, are the Russians' preferred means of getting top-secret reports safely back to the Kremlin.

However, a secret CIA report shown recently to my associate Dale Van Atta discloses that Aeroflot is more than merely a secure delivery channel for Russian spy material.

"For a number of years," the report states, "the Soviets have been suspected of using Aeroflot for (electronic) intelligence collection operations." Two examples are cited:

- "The Soviets reportedly rescheduled the flight of an IL62-Classic in 1974 to permit coverage of a U.S. command post exercise."

- In 1977, a special Aeroflot charter

flight over the continental United States "was viewed as having a collection mission, since signal intelligence intercept gear was observed on the aircraft."

These examples, the report says, "indicate a prolonged employment of Aeroflot by the Soviets for both counterintelligence and foreign collection purposes."

All over the world, Aeroflot is regarded with suspicion by local governments. The airline's chief of operations in the Netherlands was arrested some years ago and expelled on suspicion of trying to steal state secrets. And the CIA reports that on another occasion "a high-level Aeroflot official in Madrid was expelled by Spanish authorities as a result of his involvement in military espionage."

Within the Soviet Union, the security police apparently judge foreigners by what the Russians do when they're abroad. "On domestic flights over the USSR, the KGB officer probably acts in a security capacity to inform on the activities of foreigners or to block attempts by them to gather intelligence," the CIA reports. "On overseas flights, the function of the KGB officer would be to maintain control over the flight crew and prevent any possible defections."